

Bolsonaro elected president of Brazil: how did we get to this point?

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Following the recent election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil, Marcelo Badaró Mattos asks how we got here.

*Marcelo Badaró Mattos is Professor of Brazilian History at Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brazil, where he is a member of NIEP-Marx (a Marxist interdisciplinary research group). He is also member of Resistência-PSOL. Thanks to **Martin Charles Nicholl** for the translation*

On 18 October 18, Jair Bolsonaro was elected the president of the republic of Brazil. Around 55% of all valid votes were cast in his favour: this excludes blank votes, null votes and abstentions, and represents 39% of the total number of voters. The international press has classified him variously as ultra-right, right wing radical and neo-fascist. His declarations over the last 30 years, and even during the recent election campaign, have involved constant praise for violence, including torture and the military dictatorship, and has been laced with misogyny, LGBTQI-phobia, racism and xenophobia. Not to mention the demonization of the left and social movements. In the last five years he and his sons (also parliamentarians but in different spheres) have made intense use of social media to diffuse hate messages on such themes.

More recently, Bolsonaro has begun to share the conservative agendas associated with the bloc of parliamentarians elected on the strength of their positions of leadership in neo-Pentecostal churches. He has been especially associated with those who have attacked education in Brazil alleging that “communist indoctrination” dominates teaching practices and that the school environment is responsible for the diffusion of a “gender ideology” that confronts “traditional family” values. It is therefore hard to contest the attribution of the term “fascist” to describe what Bolsonaro represents and propagates.

However, the election of a fascist does not mean that, as of 1 January 2019, when he takes office, we will see the immediate installation of a fascist regime in Brazil. Right now, it is not easy to define with any accuracy what institutional forms the Brazilian State will take under Bolsonaro’s presidency, but it is possible to foresee an accentuation of the political regime’s Bonapartist features. The extent to which that happens will depend on the correlation of political and social forces. The latter will be defined by class struggle dynamics that include conflicts among different fractions of the dominant class itself as well as the underlying social conflict between classes.

In this article, however, the intention is not to predict the future. Instead, this will be an attempt to analyse the historical path that has brought us to the current situation.

How did we get here?

Much has been said about Bolsonaro’s electoral campaign methods, which circumvented the traditional communication media and instead made intense use of social media networks, message broadcast applications and an abundance of fake news. Less has been said, however, about the use

of violence, especially in the weeks leading up to the second round of the elections, when there was a clear attempt to intimidate supporters of Fernando Haddad's candidature. But however important those elements may be to enable an understanding of the campaign, they are nevertheless insufficient to explain the correlation of social forces that allowed Bolsonaro to emerge with a presidential campaign with a chance of winning.

Crisis, or rather, the crises are the key to understanding the point at which we have arrived. Since 2008, the global capitalist economy has been experiencing a process of deep depression and only in some parts of the planet has it managed to make a partial recovery. Brazil suffered the impact of the crisis in the form of a sharp drop in the economic growth rate in 2009, but it then appeared to be making a swift recovery, largely due to trade flows with China. Stimulation of Brazil's internal market also played an important role. The effect of those compensatory factors gradually began to wane and, from the year 2014 onwards, the economic indicators began their downward trajectory, showing that the economic crisis was to have its most profound effects in the period to come. The crisis strongly undermined the bases of social support of the Federal government of the day in the hands of the Brazilian Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - PT).

The PT government's loss of support, however, had begun even before the symptoms of the capitalist crisis had started to become more serious in Brazil. In June 2013, in reaction to a hike in public transport charges and against the background of the FIFA Confederations Cup, a preparatory event for the World Football Cup to be held in the following year, millions of Brazilians came out on the streets in waves of demonstrations with no unified direction and a series of fragmented demands. The so-called "June Days" were contradictory. On the one hand, they represented the emergence of grassroots demands for universal right such as improvements in public health and education systems. On the other - the beginning of an occupation of spaces on the part of an organised sector of the far right which presented itself as clamouring for the extirpation of corruption.

The demonstrations of 2013 revealed that the PT government had suffered a major blow to its support from some sectors of the working class. At the same time, some fractions of the dominant class began to distance themselves from the government, as the mass demonstrations showed that it was no longer effective in bringing about what it had promised: the social peace based on the logic of class conciliation, which it had managed to achieve in previous years.

The worsening economic crisis in the presidential election year of 2014 made it very difficult for Dilma Rousseff to get re-elected. There was a notable drop in votes cast for the PT in industrialised areas of the Southeast that had traditionally supported the party. After winning the election by a very thin margin, during which she had taken recourse to a far more radical discourse of social commitment to grassroots interests, Dilma Rousseff began her second mandate by abandoning those election campaign appeals and endeavouring to respond to pressure from the dominant class by committing to an economic agenda embracing austerity. Various fractions of the bourgeoisie seem to have surmised that the PT was no longer capable of ensuring social peace and neither was it capable of carrying forward its latter-day agenda in the rhythm and depth that were required. So, in the course of 2015, bourgeois support grew for anti-corruption and anti-government demonstrations, called for, and organised by new right-wing organisations that emerged after the "days of June" in 2013.

The performance of an important part of the judicial-police apparatus in an anti-corruption operation that exclusively targeted the relations of PT governments with big capital sectors - especially construction corporations - furnished the press with abundant material for denunciations. These fostered feelings, in a considerable portion of the petit bourgeoisie and middle salaried class, that the evil effects of the economic crisis stemmed exclusively from the corruption schemes orchestrated by the governing figures of the Workers Party. Operation *Lava Jato* (car-wash), the Brazilian version

of the Italian *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands) campaign, created the ambience for an anti-PT culture that eventually played a fundamental role in the waves of mobilisation clamouring for the impeachment of the president, Dilma Rousseff.

In the first half of 2016, on the basis of fragile accusations of illegality in the budget mathematics, the National Congress, under the leadership of a parliamentary president who a few months later was to be imprisoned for corruption himself, voted in favour of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment and opened the way for her vice-president Michel Temer to take office. Temer put forward a program of maximum austerity. He made rapid progress in stripping workers of some of their rights by making significant alterations in labour legislation. He imposed a freeze on the Federal Government's non-financial budgeted expenditure for the next 20 years, and initiated the discussion of a Social Security Reform that would make it very difficult for a large portion of the population ever to gain access to a retirement pension.

The impeachment of Dilma by means of parliamentary manoeuvring, supported by judicial measures and broad diffusion by the major media of the protests in the streets organised by far right civil society groups, constituted the first act of a new kind of coup d'état.

However, the extent of social devastation (galloping unemployment, increasing extreme poverty, public services crises etc.) and the unpopularity of the Temer administration's austerity measures left no space that would allow the traditional political parties of the dominant class to create a strong electoral alternative for the upcoming 2018 elections. That was apparent in the public opinion polls, which in the course of the first half-year of 2018 showed the majority intended to vote for ex-president Lula da Silva, the PT's candidate. To remove any possibility of an electoral victory for the PT candidate, the second act of coup d'état was accelerated through Lula's condemnation, with unprecedented haste, in the courts of appeals and his imprisonment on a charge of corruption based on very fragile evidence.

However, even with Lula da Siva impeded from contesting the elections, the candidates of the parties in power did not prove to be electorally viable and Bolsonaro advanced into the vacuum created by the crisis of legitimacy that ensued from the coup. He claimed the anti-corruption and anti-PT mobilisations as his own, presenting himself as an outsider even though he had held a seat in the parliament for almost 30 years, elected under the aegis of various different parties, all of them involved in corruption scandals.

Gramsci explained how a combination of crises in the economic, social and political spheres seriously damages the legitimacy of a given pattern of class domination, he based his analysis on a category he termed "the organic crisis" (with which the idea of "hegemony crisis" is associated). Gramsci defines the organic crisis as follows:

At a certain point in their historical lives, social groups become detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in that particular organisational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognised by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression. When such crises occur, the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic 'men of destiny'.^[1]

Taking a step back

In order to pin-point the ways in which the ruling class faces up to organic crises it is worthwhile evaluating longer-lasting processes as well as more conjuncture-related elements and others associated to the recent period.

First, it is important to acknowledge Brazil's situation in a peripheral and dependent position in relation to the global capitalist economy. The space for constructing the bourgeois state has been conditioned by the relative fragility of the bourgeoisie installed here in relation to its imperialist partners of the central economies, on the one hand and, on the other, its tendency to use force against any threat coming from subaltern social groups, especially from the urban and rural working class. That kind of historical situation led Floristan Fernandes, inspired by Gramsci's "Passive Revolution" concept, to define the form of bourgeois domination in Brazil as being marked by permanent (and preventative) counter-revolution. Thus, far from any democratic commitments in principle, the ruling class installed in Brazil has frequently had recourse to dictatorial political regimes - an option that Fernandes defines as "bourgeois autocracy". [\[ii\]](#)

Counter-revolutionary logic and the bourgeoisie's autocratic option have meant that it has often supported and had recourse to military interventions. It must be remembered that among the South American countries that experienced military dictatorships in the latter decades of the 20th century, Brazil is the one that has made the least progress in terms of memorial and reparation policies. Indeed, it is the only country in which the crimes committed by agents of the state have been completely ignored, ever since they were compulsorily sealed off from recrimination by an amnesty law approved by the dictators themselves in 1979. In recent years, in the name of the preservation of law and order, for so-called "mega-events" and, more recently, in a more generalised way, the Armed Forces have been called on to carry out interventions in the field of public security. This has been especially so in peripheral neighbourhoods and slums, the places of residence of the most impoverished section of the working class in precarious living conditions.

It is therefore not surprising that Bolsonaro comes on the scene boasting of his military past and surrounded by high-up officials of the Armed Forces, supposedly bastions of technical know-how and administrative morality, while at the same time his discourse offers a sweetened version of the past of the military dictatorship (1964-1985).

Another important element that can contribute towards an understanding of the bases of support that enabled Bolsonaro to get elected, and one whose dynamics have become established over the last three decades, is the growing political influence of the neo-Pentecostal churches. At the origin of that growth is the advance of conservatism in upper echelons of the Catholic Church emanating from the Vatican. These have broken the backbone of the social interventions made by the Basic Ecclesial Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* - CEB), forms of grassroots organisation/movements stimulated by progressive sectors of the Catholic Church, attuned to the Theology of Liberation. The breaking up of CEBs and their associated movements only served to distance the Catholic Church even further, not only from the more organised parts but also from the poorer sectors of the working class, making way for the advance of the evangelical denominations among those same sectors.

Even though we must acknowledge their heterogeneity, nevertheless, among the Pentecostal/neo-Pentecostal denominations, there is a predominant theological-political concept: the so-called "theology of prosperity". It involves an ideology of adaptation to the order of the day by means of the idea of the "individual effort" and that supports a business-like expansion of those churches into various economic sectors, particularly the communication sector. That, in turn, is coupled to a political project directed at getting religious leaders with conservative postures, and more often than not aligned with neoliberalism in the political-economic debate, to occupy spaces in the state apparatus.

In addition to all that, it is important to underscore that part of the responsibility for the final outcome of the process lies with the Workers Party and its 13 years of federal government. During its administrations, the PT worked hard to undermine the unions' powers of contestation and that of

the social movements in general, seeking to use them as mere transmission lines for their government. The PT government even came to the point of using the unions and social movements as dykes to keep back and contain the mobilisations of sectors of the working class that opposed certain government policies. In that way, they disarmed those who could have been the very ones to hold the trenches of resistance to the reactionary advances of recent years.

Looking to the future

To conclude by presenting another facet of the situation, it is worth remembering that the election campaign also revealed a possible resistance in the coming period. The only party to the left of the PT with any parliamentary representation, the Socialism and Freedom Party (*Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* - PSOL) actually increased its numbers in the House of Representatives and managed to survive the new barrier clause governing political parties. In the campaign for the first round of the elections, a spontaneous articulation in the social media gave rise to the movement Women United against Bolsonaro (*Mulheres Unidas contra Bolsonaro*) which was swiftly supported by the feminist movements and by their representatives in left-wing organisations. In practice, that movement has constituted an anti-fascist united front with a nation-wide outreach and it brought millions of people out onto the streets on 29 September and hundreds of thousands on 20 October, a week before the second round of voting. In the last week of the electoral campaign, huge crowds attended Haddad's rallies.

Even more remarkable was the movement of those thousands who went campaigning from door to door and others who set up stools in the squares offering to converse with voters who were still undecided. This was a grassroots mobilisation such as has not been seen in Brazil since the 1989 elections (the first direct elections after the end of the military dictatorship). Students also took part in movements of resistance in the public universities. In the first days after the elections, assemblies and events in the main capital cities indicate that there are many people already seeking to construct organised resistance to the measures announced by Bolsonaro and the greater threat of an intensification of the autocratic features of the Brazilian State.

[i] Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci reader: selected writings, 1916–1935*, edited by David Forgacs; with a new introduction by Eric J. Hobsbawm, New York, New York University Press, 2000, 217-218.

[ii] Florestan Fernandes, *A revolução burguesa no Brasil. Ensaio de interpretação sociológica*, Rio de Janeiro, Zahar, 1975. For a version in English see: F. Fernandes, *Reflections on the Brazilian counter-revolution*, edited by Warren Dean, New York, M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1981.

Marcelo Badaró Mattos

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